

Betsy DeVos as Education Secretary: Questions Based on Reality, Not Rhetoric

President-elect Donald Trump has selected Michigan billionaire, Republican mega-donor, and school-choice advocate Betsy DeVos as his Secretary of Education. The corporate, big-government Republican establishment individuals and groups, such as [Jeb Bush](#), his Foundation ExcelinEd, and Michigan Governor Rick Snyder, as well as groups that have received her large contributions, are thrilled with her appointment. Key education freedom leaders such as [Frank Cannon](#), president of the American Principles Project; [Joy Pullmann](#), managing editor of The Federalist; and grassroots parent anti-Common Core groups in [Michigan](#), [Oklahoma](#), [Florida](#), and around the nation are far less excited.

Here are a multitude of questions that parents need answered and that the [U.S. Senate](#), particularly those members of the Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions ([HELP](#)) [Committee](#), should be asking. They are based on President-elect Trump's repeated promises to stop Common Core, scale back or close the U.S. Department of Education (USED), and support student data privacy; DeVos's rhetoric quoted in her [sudden website](#) statement saying she opposed Common Core; her record as documented by the [Stop Common Core in Michigan parents](#) who have experienced her brand of education reform firsthand; and other sources.

- 1) You have said repeatedly that you support parents' rights to choose the education they feel is best for their child. Given that and President-elect Trump's promise to greatly scale back the power and authority of USED and listen to the "forgotten men and women of America," what will you do to:
 - Listen to parents of children whose children are suffering under the academically inferior, [developmentally inappropriate](#) and [psychologically manipulative](#) Common Core standards and not just the corporate and foundation special interests? In other words, will you have a more open door policy for parent groups than [you were reported to have had](#) in Michigan?
 - Support the rights of parents to opt out of invasive, [validity-challenged state testing](#)?
 - Remove any federal barriers that may prevent parents from choosing the type of classroom in which they want their children to learn – [traditional or high tech](#), such as the federal mandate for a single statewide test that may require students to be tested online?
- 2) We understand that your [website](#) statement right after your appointment that you are "not a supporter – period" of Common Core was meant to reassure activists that you oppose the standards and will honor Mr. Trump's promise to get rid of Common Core. Please list your efforts during your extensive period of education activism and philanthropy to fight the implementation of the standards.
- 3) In your website statement you mention "high standards," and in the Trump Transition Team [readout](#) of your November 19th meeting with the president-elect, you are reported to have discussed "higher national standards." Please explain how this is different from Common Core. Also, please justify this stand in light of the clear lack of constitutional and statutory authority for the federal government to involve itself in standards and Mr. Trump's desire to stop Common Core, make education local, and scale back or abolish the USED.
- 4) Would you please reconcile your November 23rd website statement that you are "not a supporter – period" of Common Core and your record when you have, either individually or through your organizations (especially the Great Lakes Education Project (GLEP) that you founded, chaired, [and of which your family foundation is still the majority funder](#)):
 - Been described as supporting Common Core by Tonya Allen of the Skillman Foundation in the [Detroit News](#)?
 - Actively worked to block a bill that would have repealed and replaced Michigan's Common Core standards with the Massachusetts standards, arguably the best in the nation?

- Actively lobbied for [continued implementation of Common Core](#) in Michigan?
 - [Financially supported](#) pro-Common Core candidates in Michigan?
 - Funded [Alabama pro-Common Core](#) state school board candidates?
 - Threatened the grassroots parent organization Stop Common Core in Michigan with legal action for showing the clear link between GLEP endorsement and Common Core support?
- 5) The Indiana voucher law that you and your organization, the American Federation for Children (AFC), [strongly supported and funded](#) requires voucher recipient schools to [administer the public school Common Core-aligned tests](#) without the option of choosing a nationally norm-referenced test (sec. 4.7) and submit to the grading system based on those same Common Core-aligned tests. The tests determine what is taught, which means that this law is imposing Common Core on private schools. Indiana “is the second-worst in the country on infringing on private school autonomy” according to the [Center for Education Reform](#) because of that and other onerous requirements and received an F grade on the Education Liberty Watch School Choice Freedom [Grading Scale](#). Do you support imposing public-school standards, curriculum and tests on private schools?
 - 6) Through Excel in Ed and the American Federation for Children, you have influenced legislation that has made Florida a "leader" in school choice, yet, still, the majority of students, especially those in rural areas, in Florida choose to attend traditional public schools. Public school advocates in Florida complain that expanded school choice has negatively affected their traditional public schools, even in previously high-performing districts. As Secretary of Education, how will you support the rights of parents and communities whose *first* choice is their community's traditional public school?
 - 7) [You and AFC](#) have been strong supporters of federal Title I portability. As Secretary of Education, would you require the same public school, Common Core tests and the rest of the federal regulations for private schools under a Title I portability program as [Jeb Bush recommended](#) for [Mitt Romney in 2012](#) (p.24)? If yes, please cite the constitutional authority for the federal government to be involved in regulating schools, including private schools, and explain how this policy squares with Mr. Trump’s promise to reduce the federal education footprint?
 - 8) Right now the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requires secretarial approval of state education plans for standards, tests and accountability. Will you support state sovereignty by approving the state plans in line with Mr. Trump’s vision of decreasing the federal role in education or will you exercise federal control by secretarial veto power?
 - 9) The [Philanthropy Roundtable](#) group that you chaired published a [report on charter schools](#), but did not mention the Hillsdale classical charter schools, even though they are in your home state of Michigan and Hillsdale is nationally renowned for its classical and constitutional teaching and for not taking federal funding. Have you or any of your organizations done anything substantive to support the Hillsdale model aside from a few brief mentions on your websites? If not, do you want all charter schools in Michigan and elsewhere to only teach Common Core-aligned standards, curriculum and tests?
 - 10) During the primary campaign, President-elect Trump had the [following exchange](#) with a parent activist:

“What would you do to protect the privacy of students now that Obama has pretty much opened that up and anybody can get that private information?” Banfield asked further. “Would you close the loophole in the FERPA law?”

“He opened that up for everybody but himself,” said Trump. “When you think about it. That’s very interesting.”

“I would close all of it,” Trump replied. “You have to have privacy. You have to have privacy. So I’d close all of it. But, most of all, I’d get everything out of Washington, ‘cause that’s where it’s all emanating from.”

In contrast, the [Philanthropy Roundtable](#), which you chaired, published a report called [Blended Learning: A Wise Giver’s Guide to Supporting Tech-assisted Teaching](#) (analyzed [HERE](#)) that lauds the Dream Box software that “records 50,000 data points per student per hour” and does not contain a single use of the words “privacy,” “transparency” [as in who receives that data and how it is used to make life-changing decision for children], or “consent.” As Secretary, will you follow Mr. Trump’s vision of rescinding the [regulatory gutting](#) of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) that allows sharing of sensitive student personally identifiable information (PII) with third parties and multiple federal agencies, or will you continue and promote the corporate data-mining efforts of Dream Box and [Knewton](#), whose CEO bragged about collecting “5-10 million data points per user per day,” described in your organization’s report?

- 11) Related to Question 10 above, there is currently a federal commission, the Commission on Evidence-based Policymaking, which is discussing lifting the federal prohibition on the creation of a student unit-record system. If that prohibition is removed, the federal government would be allowed to maintain a data base linking student data from preschool through the workforce. That idea is strongly [opposed by parent groups](#) and [privacy organizations](#). Privacy expert [Barmak Nassirian](#), said:

Tracking autonomous free individuals through most of their lives in the name of better information for the benefit of others may be justifiable, but its extremism should at the very least be acknowledged and addressed.

Will you commit to protecting student privacy by [recommending](#) to the Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking that this prohibition be left in place?

- 12) As outlined in this [letter from Liberty Counsel](#) that was co-signed by dozens of parent groups across the nation, the National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB) plans to add subjective, invasive, illegal, and unconstitutional survey or test questions to the 2017 administration of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). What will you do to rein in NAGB and protect the psychological privacy and freedom of conscience of American students?
- 13) There has been an explosion of effort to expand invasive, subjective [social emotional learning \(SEL\) standards](#), curricula and [assessment](#) via commissions, programs, federally funded groups, the newly passed Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the proposed Strengthening Education Through Research Act, and others. What is your view of SEL and what will you do to protect student psychological privacy and freedom of conscience?